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ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine*®

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a **NEW** detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

We're back with Henry and Ralph again—Sergeant Henry Turnbuckle and Ralph, his partner in crime detection. And once again you will be regaled by Henry's magnificent theorizing and inferring—this time in a kidnaping case that had its delicious moments . . .

THE GOURMET KIDNAPER

by JACK RITCHIE

We were not notified of the kidnaping until after the ransom had been paid and the victim returned unharmed, which took the immediacy out of it.

"How much was paid?" Ralph asked.

"Fifty thousand dollars," Cunningham said.

I pondered. Only fifty thousand dollars? That seemed like a rather conservative figure for this day and age, considering that Albert Cunningham's visible estate consisted of acres of wooded and landscaped grounds, a tremendous house, and a covey of functional and recreational outbuildings.

We were in a drawing room considerably larger than my entire apartment and twice as high. Cunningham and his daughter, Stephanie, sat side by side on a sofa opposite.

Cunningham commenced the details. "Monday evening I returned from the city at around eight and stopped my car at the chain we keep across our driveway. Just as I was about to unhitch it, a man stepped out of the darkness of some bushes and pointed a gun at me."

"Could you describe him?" Ralph asked.

"Everything about him seemed about average, except for his full beard. That, of course, I later saw, in a better light, was false."

I grasped the significance of the beard. "Obviously a disguise."

Cunningham studied me for a moment, then continued, "He led

1979 by Jack Ritchie.

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She smiled
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me down the road a hundred yards or so to another automobile parked at the side of the road."

"Did you get the license number?" Ralph asked, with the faintest of hope.

"I'm afraid not. It was too dark. He then ordered me to lie down on the rear floor of the car where he tied and blindfolded me."

"Was there anyone else in the car?"

"No. My kidnaper appeared to be alone. He drove for more than an hour before he finally stopped."

I nodded sagaciously. "The time of travel is unlikely to give us any true indication of exactly how far he took you from here. He could have made all kinds of devious turns so that you would have no idea of his true route."

Cunningham agreed. "When he finally stopped the car, he untied me, but left me blindfolded. He guided me into a building and down some stairs. When he removed my blindfold, I found that I was in a room approximately twelve by ten feet, its walls consisting of cinder blocks. There were no windows and only one door—a rather heavy one with metal sheathing and which, of course, was kept locked."

"What were the furnishings of this room?" I asked.

"Just a cot, a small table, a chair, and a small electric heater."

"Any reading materials?" I asked.

"No. I spent my time lying on the cot."

"A pity," I said. "You should have requested reading materials. Magazines, specifically."

Naturally they looked at me.

I chuckled. "It is entirely possible that the kidnaper subscribes to magazines, as almost all of us non-kidnapers do. And in an unthinking moment he might have gathered together an armful of his old magazines and brought them to you, forgetting that his mailing address would be on the cover of each one. Had he done this, we would now know his name, address, and the expiration dates of his magazines."

Stephanie Cunningham smiled benevolently. "On the other hand, if my father had been given the magazines, perhaps the kidnaper would belatedly have realized that there were address labels on their covers and that he would then have to kill him to protect his identity."

She smiled at her father now. "Daddy, do you realize that you very likely saved your own life by not asking for magazines?"

I cleared my throat. "Did you hear any noises? Sounds which might enable you to pinpoint your place of confinement? The whistle of a train on a regular schedule? The roar of airplanes? The howling of dogs?"

"No. Nothing at all, as far as I can recall."

"How long were you kept in this room?" Ralph asked.

"Three days and almost four nights. I never set foot out of that room until Friday morning at about five A.M. when he drove me out into the country and left me tied and blindfolded beside a road. I easily managed to free myself in five minutes and walked to a farmhouse where I phoned Stephanie. She came and picked me up about an hour later."

I drew Ralph to the other side of the room where they could not overhear us.

"Ralph, I don't know what the motive is, but this whole thing could be a fraud. The man was never kidnaped."

"What makes you say that, Henry?"

"The contents of the room."

"What about the contents of the room?"

"Cunningham claims that he was confined to that room for three days and four nights. He also claims that he never left the room for any purpose whatsoever. Yet he made no mention of sanitary facilities. Surely during the course of three days and four nights, he must have had to . . ." I delicately left the sentence hanging in the air.

Ralph thought about that, but not for long. "I'll ask him if there was a lavatory."

"Ralph," I cautioned, "if you put the question to him direct, he will, of course, realize the flaw in his fabrication and quickly create a mythical bathroom for his chimerical place of detention. No, Ralph, I will cleverly question him and back him into a corner."

We rejoined the Cunninghams.

Cunningham spoke first. "By the way, I forgot to mention that there was a chemical toilet in a corner of the room. One of those things that people put in their fishing and hunting cabins."

I cleared my throat. "There is one thing that bothers me. You say that you were dropped off in the countryside after five A.M. this morning. You walked to the nearest farmhouse and phoned. Your daughter picked you up an hour later, which means that it also must have taken her approximately that long to return here. In other words, you got back home before seven this morning, yet you

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did not phone the police until after eleven."

There was a silence on the part of Cunningham and then he sighed. "To tell you the truth, I wasn't at all certain whether I should call the police or not. He really wasn't such a bad fellow at all. Quite polite, and he kept reassuring me that I had nothing at all to worry about. He said that even if the ransom were not paid, he would still release me unharmed at the end of the week."

I shrugged. "Undoubtedly a ploy to neutralize any attempt to escape."

"Perhaps," Cunningham said. "However, he also urged me to think of the fifty thousand dollars as a loan. He would pay it all back some day, plus any reasonable amount of interest I might choose to impose."

Cunningham sighed. "When I got home I gave the matter considerable thought. I wondered whether I really should create additional trouble for the man. He might legitimately and desperately need the money. And, after all, what is fifty thousand dollars?"

Ralph and I looked at each other.

"To me," Cunningham added.

Stephanie smiled. "We finally decided that perhaps it was our duty as citizens to report the matter to the police, on the assumption that no matter what the mitigating circumstances, kidnaping is still an anti-social act." She glanced at her watch. "It is high noon and feeding time. Would you care to join us?"

"Well," Ralph said, "maybe some coffee."

In the dining room, however, places had already been set for Ralph and me and we did not protest.

I buttered a slice of white bread. "You say that this man wore a false beard? You never saw him without it?"

"Never. I wouldn't be able to identify him without it. However . . ."

I pounced. "However what?"

"Well, there *was* something slightly familiar about him. Something about his eyes and his forehead. And yet I am positive that I never saw him before in my life."

"Are you certain that your kidnaper was a man?" I asked. "After all, a beard can be quite comprehensive."

Cunningham selected a slice of rye bread. "He wore a T-shirt occasionally."

Ralph put marmalade on his white bread. "There was just this one man? He didn't have any accomplices?"

"If he did, I didn't see them."

Stephanie took her white bread without butter or marmalade.

That made it three white. One rye. Why did it strike me that there could be something of significance in that?

Stephanie supplied further information. "I got the phone call at about midnight. The man told me that he'd kidnaped my father and he wanted fifty thousand dollars for his return. Small bills, naturally. He said he'd give me three days to get it together and then he would phone again and give me directions on how to get the money to him. I was not to call the police or he would kill Dad."

Cunningham corroborated. "He apologized to me for having to make the threat, but felt that in a situation like this it was *de rigueur*."

Stephanie agreed. "I got the money together and he phoned again Thursday night, which was yesterday. He told me to put the money into a briefcase and drive west on Highway 94 until I got to the turnoff ramp for Ionia. At the bottom of the ramp I would find an arterial stop sign. I was to leave the briefcase in the tall grass beside it. And I did. Then I found the entrance ramp and went back up onto Highway 94. Actually, I saw the kidnaper pick up the money. He must have been waiting."

I frowned thoughtfully. "You mean that you actually saw the briefcase being picked up?"

"Yes. From up on the highway. I looked back down and the ramp is lighted, you know. And I saw this bearded man appear, pick up the briefcase, and scoot toward a car parked at the side of the road."

"Did you, by any remote chance, follow him? At least long enough to get his license number?"

"No. I didn't want to do anything that might alarm him. After all, he still had my father."

I turned to Cunningham. "Did this kidnaper seem to be intelligent?"

He blinked. "Well, I didn't give him an I.Q. test, but from what talk we had I'd say that he could easily hold his own."

I addressed Stephanie. "Who else besides you knew about the kidnaping?"

"No one. I didn't even tell the servants. As far as they're concerned, my father was simply off on a business trip."

My eyes went to the bit of rye bread in Cunningham's fingers. "During your days of confinement, what were you fed? Hamburgers? Hot dogs? TV-dinners?"

"No. As a matter of fact, the meals I was served were actually

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delicious. My kidnaper was a superb cook. I ate everything brought to me."

"Your kidnaper cooked those meals for you? How do you know?"

"He told me. I mean after Wednesday's *Weiner Schnitzel* I off-handedly said, 'Give my compliments to the cook,' and he told me that he did all of the cooking himself."

"Mr. Cunningham, are you allergic to white bread?"

"No."

"Then you eat rye bread by choice?"

"Yes. I just don't like the taste of white bread." He thought for a moment. "But I do happen to be allergic to tomatoes. They make me break out in a rash."

I was on the scent. "You mentioned that during your confinement you ate everything presented to you. Did that include white bread?"

"There was no white bread. Just rye."

I nodded relentlessly. "You had three breakfasts, three luncheons, and three dinners?"

"Yes."

"And at these luncheons and dinners, were you served a salad?"

"Yes."

"The same salad every time?"

"No. They were varied."

"And in any of these six salads, did you find a single shred or bit of tomato?"

"No."

"Ha," I said. "And you were served rye bread? Not white?"

"Rye bread."

"Did you *request* this rye bread?"

"No. It came with the food."

"No white bread was ever offered instead of rye?"

"No."

I smiled triumphantly. "Mr. Cunningham, we live in a white-bread society. White bread is automatically offered at every meal. And yet it was not offered to you even once. And further, despite being served six varied salads, not one of them contained so much as a sliver of tomato." I rubbed my hands. "All the pieces are beginning to fit together."

"That's nice," Stephanie said.

I nodded. "First of all, does it not strike you as rather odd that the kidnaper would leap out of the bushes to claim the ransom money practically as the depositor's taillights were disappearing

into the darkness? Should he not have cautiously waited for at least a little while, on the possibility that this might be a police trap? How did he *know* that the police had not been called into the case?"

None of them, of course, had the answer.

I smiled grimly. "He *knew* that the police had not been brought into the case because his *accomplice* had given him that information. And that accomplice is in this very house."

There was an awed silence and then Stephanie said, "But the only person in this house who knew about the kidnaping and that I did not call the police is me. Are you saying that I had a part in this kidnaping just because I get a miserly allowance and need the extra spending money desperately?"

Cunningham smiled fondly. "I've arranged that Stephanie gets no substantial amount of money from me until she's thirty and has accomplished something in this world on her own. I think it builds character, or it should."

Stephanie pursued her point. "Are you insinuating that just because my father said that the kidnaper looked vaguely familiar—despite that itchy false beard—that he might have been one of my numerous boy friends and that we were in cahoots?"

"Tut, tut," I said charitably. "I have other fish to fry. Let me reconstruct the 'compliments to the cook' incident. When you uttered those words, Mr. Cunningham, did your kidnaper not *blink* first, and then, quickly recovering, say that *he* did the cooking?"

"What are you getting at, Henry?" Ralph asked.

I nailed it down. "This kidnaper knew Mr. Cunningham's eating preferences and allergies. He did not have to be told."

Ralph was not impressed. "So he did a little research on Cunningham before he pulled the snatch."

I shook my head. "That simply doesn't wash, Ralph. What kidnaper would risk his precious anonymity by going about asking the food idiosyncracies of his intended victim? If he were so concerned about the matter, it is much more likely that he would ask his victim *after* he had kidnaped him. Mr. Cunningham, who knows that you eat only rye bread and are allergic to tomatoes?"

"I suppose a lot of my friends might. After all, I've led a full life."

"Your meals were served piping hot?"

"Yes."

I chuckled. "Do you know *why* your kidnaper blinked and suddenly volunteered the information that *he* was the one who did the cooking?"

Cunningham

"I assure you
When you suddenly realized
recognize the case?"

"Recognize the case?"

I nodded.
cellars?"

"Not part of the house where?"

"I thought you were blindfolded and blindfolded directly back to your own cell?"

There was no way to arrive at the truth.

"The kidnaper said that Mr. Cunningham prepared to deliver the package. And being that the police had to pick up the package."

My smile never reached my eyes. I had never seen a kidnaper in a kitchen, yet I was with her sister.

Cunningham rose. "Excuse me?"

"Matilda said there is a job to be done."

"What is the matter?"

"The matter is that the sister and the sister-in-law are such a dead end."

I looked at the dead end and the dead end.

Cunningham rubbed his jaw. "I still don't remember the blink."

"I assure you, sir, there *was* a blink. And for a very good reason. When you offered your compliments to the cook, your kidnaper suddenly realized that there existed the possibility that you might *recognize* the cooking. And he wanted to thwart that immediately."

"Recognize the cooking?"

I nodded. "Are you familiar with your own basement? Your own cellars?"

"Not particularly. I suppose there are probably some parts of this house where I've never set foot."

"I thought as much. It is my contention that when you were bound and blindfolded, you were driven in a great circle and brought directly *back to your own home* and led to a place of confinement in your own cellars."

There was a respectful silence and then Ralph said, "How do you arrive at that, Henry?"

"The kidnaper had to have an accomplice. Someone who *knew* what Mr. Cunningham did and did not eat. Someone who could prepare delicious meals and see that they were served piping hot. And being here on the premises, the kidnaper would have *known* that the police had not been called into the case and that it was safe to pick up the money."

My smile wrapped things up. "I do not know her name. I have never seen her before, but I'll wager that if you step into your own kitchen, you will find your cook dreaming about what she will do with her share of fifty thousand dollars."

Cunningham's face became extremely thoughtful.

I rose. "Shall we interrogate the cook? What is her name, by the way?"

"Matilda," Cunningham said. He seemed to pull himself together. "There is just one thing wrong with your theory, Sergeant Turnbuckle."

"What is that?"

"The meals I ate in that basement room were absolutely delicious. And the simple fact is that our Matilda is a terrible cook."

Stephanie confirmed that. "Frankly we would fire her, but she's such a dear soul and she means well and tries her best."

I looked down at my plate. Here, while I had been talking, I had also been wrestling with a portion of stubborn Swiss steak. Also the mashed potatoes were lumpy and watery. The broccoli was definitely dead. There was no question about it, Matilda was a dreadful cook.

I sipped some coffee, which was bitter. "On the other hand, for those three days, Matilda may very cleverly have cooked superb meals just to throw us off the track."

Ralph had had enough to eat too. "I guess we'll be getting back to headquarters now."

In our car I brooded. "It is still possible that this kidnaping never took place at all. Or, if it did, Stephanie may indeed have had a part in it. We will have to observe if she spends above her allowance, whatever that is."

On Monday, a little after quitting time, Ralph had already gone home, when the phone at our desk rang. I glanced about hoping someone else would answer it, but no one was available. I picked up the receiver.

It was Stephanie Cunningham. "How is the case going?"

"We are diligently pursuing the matter. Something may break at any moment."

"Just as I thought. You're hopelessly stymied. How about coming over to our place for dinner tonight?"

A thought came to me. It had never been officially ascertained whether Stephanie herself might not secretly be a magnificent cook. Perhaps if I craftily got her to prepare a—

"We're starting to invite people over for dinner again," Stephanie said. "We've got a new cook and he's absolutely superb."

"He?"

"Yes. Father had a little talk with Matilda after you left and accidentally discovered that she had a brother who's a chef in a Sheboygan restaurant. So he drove right up there and hired him."

"What about Matilda?"

"We're not throwing her out into the cold. She'll be his assistant or whatever. Franz was just about to open a restaurant up there, but Daddy somehow persuaded him to come and work for us. Daddy claims that Franz is so good he's already paid him two years' salary in advance."

At the Cunningham residence I found the occasion to peek into the kitchen.

I saw a short stocky man with blondish hair and a slightly bulging forehead presiding cheerfully over steaming pots on the kitchen range.

I also saw a short stocky woman with blondish hair and a slightly bulging forehead amiably chopping onions.

I pictured them both wearing beards. Yes, the bulging foreheads

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would suggest a certain filial relationship, which had, however, escaped Cunningham's attention until my words had created a comparison.

Had Matilda been Franz's accomplice?

I doubted it. Otherwise she would not have been so free to volunteer that she had a brother in Sheboygan.

But she and Franz had probably exchanged visits now and then, during which time Franz had learned of Cunningham's food preferences. And during the kidnaping itself—and Franz had probably taken Cunningham to some Sheboygan area cellar—he had undoubtedly phoned Matilda daily and learned in casual conversation that no member of the household staff was aware of the kidnaping and that obviously therefore the police had not been called into the case.

Had Cunningham presented Franz with an ultimatum? Exposure or kitchen service?

And could I now get Cunningham to testify against his new jewel of a cook? Do people who go to great lengths to find good cooks volunteer to send them to prison?

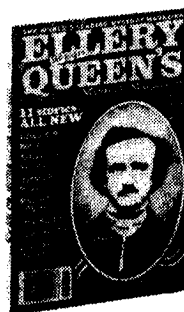
Of course not.

Ah, well.

At dinner I found the beef with Chinese black mushrooms absolutely delicious.

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